CHARACTER AND PERSPECTIVE:
THE MULTI-QUEST IN J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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Abstract: This paper outlines an innovative approach to studying the complex character system of *The Lord of the Rings*. From a narratological point of view, the text narrates not just one Ring-quest but many quest plots. In contrast to a clear association of characters with actantial roles in the wake of formalist and structuralist analyses of (mono-)quest narratives, a multi-quest narrative with many questing agents whose goals overlap only partially – some of which are even opposed to one another – defies such clear-cut categorisations. This paper brings to the fore the characters' different perspectives on the interpretation and evaluation of the subplots of the text. It contrasts the overall presentation of the Ring-quest with marginalised points of view of secondary (anti-)heroes such as Sam, Éowyn, Galadriel, or Gollum.

Keywords: Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*, Quest narratives, Actancial roles, Characters

A great multitude of people populate J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. The success of Middle-earth as a convincing secondary world is partly based on the staggering variety, diversity, and complexity of its inhabitants: they serve as an essential component of the distinctive and immediately recognisable setting to Tolkien's quest-romance. Yet while it is inevitable that not all of them may become *characters* in that they are allowed to develop any individualised personality traits, an extraordinary number of them do, which raises several important questions.

The central tension is succinctly distilled into the binary formula *The one* [protagonist] *vs. the many* [other characters], which is the title of Alex Woloch's eminent monograph on secondary characters in the realistic novel (2003). There is a natural discrepancy between the detailed depiction of main figures of the text and the representation of marginal people at the very periphery of the reader's attention. Each character claims their own character space, "that particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" (Woloch, 2003: 14). As a consequence, a large number of characters in a single narrative have the potential to destabilise the unity, coherence, and overall structure of the text. In this regard, Woloch asks the significant questions: "How can many people be contained within a single narrative?" (*Ibid*: 1), and "[h]ow does the text organize a large number of different characters within a unified symbolic and structural system?" (*Ibid*: 14).

Of course there already exists abundant literature on character in *The Lord of the Rings*. One could broadly classify these critical texts into studies which (i) focus on individual characters in the form of character studies[1]; (ii) establish comparisons between two or more characters[2]; or (iii) discuss a class of characters such as

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[1] For example, cf. Devin Brown (2006), "From Isolation to Community: Frodo's Incomplete Personal Quest in *The Lord of the Rings*", *Mythlore* 25.1-2: 163-173; Judy Ford and Robin Reid (2009), "Councils and Kings: Aragorn's Journey towards Kingship in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings*", *Tolkien Studies* 6: 71-90; Michael Treschow (2006), "Bombadil's Role in *The Lord of the Rings*", *Mythlore* 25.1-2: 175-196.

[2] For example, cf. Maria Raffaella Benvenuto (2006), "Against Stereotype: Éowyn and Lúthien as 20th Century Women", in *Tolkien and Modernity Vol. 1*, ed. Frank Weinreich and Thomas Honegger (Zollikhofen: Walking Tree, 31-54; Janet Croft (2011), "Túrin and Aragorn: Evading and Embracing

hobbits, female characters, wizards, half-elves, dwarves, etc.[3]. The items (i) and (iii) may be combined so that a single character is analysed in terms of a whole class as a pars-pro-toto. This, however, could lead to a reductionist picture. For example, Lynette Porter laments that Éowyn often has to bear the burden of being the (sole) vehicle for feminist claims on the text:

Representing all womanhood seems to be Éowyn's fate [...] She is often either held as a positive role model to represent the strong, assertive woman in a male-dominated world, or denounced because in the book she dresses as a man, Dernhelm, to be able to go to war, thus being perceived as having to renounce her femininity in order to be successful. Éowyn is further penalized by some readers who believe she 'sold out' by marrying Faramir and turning into a wife and, presumably, mother. (Porter, 2005: 91)

None of the approaches mentioned addresses the whole character system of *The Lord of the Rings* as "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces – differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure – into a unified narrative structure" (Woloch, 2003: 14). The questions formulated above cannot be answered with regard to any single character or any thematically linked class of characters: they call for a structural analysis of the interrelation and interaction of the characters as essential parts of the quest plot.

Furthermore, the need for a new attempt at a systematic study of Tolkien's characters is also underscored by the fact that some of the fundamental points of criticisms brought forward by early reviews and studies on characterisation in *The Lord of the Rings* can be adequately addressed only by considering the character system as a whole. Especially early critics and reviewers – even those who were quite sympathetic to the text, like Burton Raffel or W. H. Auden – were not particularly convinced that characterisation, the subtle portrayal of people, was at all an important

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Fate", *Mythlore* 29.3-4: 155-170; Charles Nelson (2002), "From Gollum to Gandalf: The Guide Figures in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*", *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 13.1: 47-61.

[3] For example, cf. Leslie Donovan (2003), "The Valkyrie Reflex in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*", in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance, London: Routledge, 106-132; Michael Stanton (2001), *Hobbits, Elves, and Wizards: Exploring the Wonders and Worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien's* The Lord of the Rings, New York: Palgrave; Renée Vink (2013), "'Jewish' Dwarves: Tolkien and Anti-Semitic Stereotyping", *Tolkien Studies* 10: 123-145.

issue in Tolkien's work (cf. Muir, 1955; Spacks, 1969: 81-99). For example, Burton Raffel affirms that while Gandalf "is a force more than he is a personage [...], [i]t is in Frodo, and in Frodo only, that I think Tolkien achieves something of what one can call the characterization of literature" (Raffel, 1969: 238). This quotation indicates a tendency in Tolkien criticism: that the only significant "real" development occurs in Frodo, the main protagonist. Even W. H. Auden stated that "the Quest tale is ill adapted to subtle portrayals of character; its personages are almost bound to be archetypes rather than idiosyncratic individuals" (Auden, 1969: 49). But what concept of "character" is implied when critics lament the absence of detailed investigations into the psyche of the people of the tale? Is there any hope for Sam, Gandalf, Aragorn, Éowyn, Gollum, and all the others to be anything but archetypal – or even "cardboard" (Bloom, 2008: vii) – agents performing their task in the set-up of the quest plot? Do they lend themselves not just for comparative studies[4], source studies[5], and thematically oriented studies [6] but also as objects of readings on literary characterisation? In other words, we are looking for people in *The Lord of the Rings* who are

[…] in a way more complex though not necessarily more vivid than other characters. They are the vehicles by which all the most interesting questions are raised; [...] [i]n a sense they are end-products; they are what the novel exists for; it exists to reveal them. Because of this it is unwise to generalize about them; each exists as an individual case and demands special consideration. (Harvey, 1965: 56)

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[4] For example, cf. Carter, Downey, Hopkins. Carter, Susan (2007) "Galadriel and Morgan Le Fey: Tolkien's Redemption of the Lady of the Lacuna", *Mythlore* 25.3-4: 71-89; Downey, Sarah (2011) "Cordial Dislike: Reinventing the Celestial Ladies of Pearl and Purgatorio in Tolkien's Galadriel", *Mythlore* 29.3-4: 101-117; Hopkins, Lisa (2007), "Gollum and Caliban: Evolution and Design", *Tolkien and Shakespeare: Essays on Shared Themes and Language*. Edited by Janet Croft. Jefferson: McFarland, 281-293.

[5] For example, cf. Marjorie Burns (2007), "Tracking the Elusive Hobbit (In Its Pre-Shire Den)", *Tolkien Studies* 4 (2007): 200-211; Frank Riga (2008), "Gandalf and Merlin: J. R. R. Tolkien's Adoption and Transformation of a Literary Tradition", *Mythlore* 27.1-2: 21-44; Taryne Taylor (2008), "Investigating the Role and Origin of Goldberry in Tolkien's Mythology", *Mythlore* 27.1-2: 147-156.

[6] For example, cf. Nancy Enright (2007), "Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power", *Renascence* 59.2: 93-108; Michael Livingston (2006), "The Shell-Shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring", *Mythlore* 25.1-2: 77-92; Karen Nikakis (2007), "Sacral Kingship: Aragorn as the Rightful and Sacrificial King in *The Lord of the Rings*", *Mythlore* 26.1-2: 83-90.

Quite in contrast to such a quasi-mimetic approach, which treats characters as more or less successful imitations of complex "real" people, one also has to bear in mind the opposite tradition, begun in antiquity with Aristotle and resurging prominently in structuralism, which sees characters as agents performing certain functions that cause and react to the plot of the narrative. Abstract story models are a powerful tool, and it makes perfect sense that *The Lord of the Rings*, which is a standard example of a quest narrative, should be a text to which the cognitive schema of the quest masterplot is applied. There are many models in this direction: one thinks of the early Russian formalist *Morphology of the folktale* by Vladimir Propp from the 1920s, of Joseph Campbell's *monomyth*, of Frye's *mythos* of Romance, of Greimas' actant model; or of W. H. Auden, who wrote his famous article on the "Quest Hero" particularly with *The Lord of the Rings* in mind[7]. As a consequence, it becomes quite easy to assign characters to functions, to establish a clear-cut linear relation between characters and the actions they perform. Established terms for such functions (or rather "agents") would be quester (or protagonist), helper, donor, villain – or more generally, opponent –, quest object, etc. The main caveat is that this association of characters with actants easily leads to reductionism and fosters readings of the text which altogether dismiss the characterisation, the personality-building of the characters. However, a functional model that assigns characters to actantial roles is not per se reductionist as long as its limitations are accounted for. The foremost limitation is that each actantial model is restricted to the character system of *one storyline*. Hence the first step to overcome this simplification is not just to reject the powerful actantial model for the character system in a prototypical quest narrative but to reflect whether there is only *one* character system to be described – the one centring on the Ring-quest – or whether there are actually *many* of them.

Another hypothesis, which is very much linked with this one, is that the overall narrative structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is determined by the Ring-quest: it

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[7] Cf. Vladimir Propp (1996), *Morphology of the Folktale*, ed. Louis A. Wagner, trans. Laurence Scott, 2nd ed., Austin: University of Texas Press; Joseph Campbell (1968), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton: Princeton UP; Northrop Frye (1966), *Anatomy of criticism*, Princeton: Princeton UP; Algirdas Greimas (1971), *Strukturale Semantik: Methodologische Untersuchungen*, trans. Jens Ihwe, Braunschweig: Vieweg; Auden, W. H. (1969). "The Quest Hero", *Tolkien and the Critics,* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

provides the essential story, or rather story-thread, of the text. However, it is not the only thread in this narrative web, although it is the dominant one. There are other storylines, and they are also best understood in terms of quest narratives. Importantly, these narrative threads are sometimes foregrounded in the text – not least because there is no truly omniscient narrative situation (if that is at all possible). In fact, there is mostly what is called ambient focalisation: the perspective and experiential quality alternate between different individual participants in the text, especially the hobbits.

This is where the second major component of the present paper comes in. A study on literary character inevitably touches on the issue of perspective because it is through the characters that different perspectives on the narrated story-world are provided. Conversely, the necessarily subjective, individualized perspective from which a story is looked at and put to words by the narrator is the crucial factor that transforms functional agents into characters and endows them with "experientiality"[8]. A story is "always presented from within a certain 'vision'" (Bal, 1997: 142), but apart from the overall perspective that governs the narrated text (and which the narratee is invited to adopt) each of the characters perceives the narrated events from his and her necessarily subjective vantage point. This is not primarily a question of the limited perspective on the whole event structure resulting from personalized focalisers but rather an effect of the individualized *interpretation* and *evaluation* of the events by different characters. Hence while it is clear that the overall presentation of the story of *The Lord of the Rings* centres on the Ring-quest and consequently assigns characters like Aragorn, Éowyn, or Gollum into adjunct positions relative to the (primary) quester, their own perspective on their position in the story is bound to be different. Each of them brings a radically new point of view to the story, and each of them foregrounds a different character as the protagonist. How would *they* "read" (interpret) their stories – and even more importantly, how would they write them? How do they perceive[9] their own position in the tale – and how does this affect the

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[8] The significance of experientiality as the "quasi-mimetic evocation of 'real-life experience'" in narrative fiction is extensively discussed by Monika Fludernik (1996), in *Towards a 'Natural' Narratology* (London: Routledge).

[9] It is important to emphasize the aspect of perception (including interpretation and evaluation) rather than narration.

overall presentation and evaluation of these characters? How would the incipit, the complication, the development, the climax, the resolution, the dénouement, and the closure look like from their point of view? And how does the evaluation of a seemingly marginal character change once s/he is interpreted as the protagonist of his or her own storyline with the potential to develop into a fully round character?

If the central claim of this paper – that there are many quest plots in *The Lord of the Rings* – is true, then there are equally many character systems, each of them revolving around a different central quester and his or her synergistic and antagonistic secondary figures, and characterisation is established precisely in the interplay of these multiple character systems. Inevitably, each of these individual narratives other than the Ring-quest is subordinated and hence only fragmentarily developed in the text. Nevertheless, they are there, and to ignore them would mean to ignore an essential aspect of the secondary characters; precisely that aspect which makes them complex and interesting. Given that there are multiple questers, *The Lord of the Rings* may be called not just a quest narrative but a multi-quest narrative. In different narrative threads – that is: in different quests – people perform different functions; they may be helpers in one quest and yet play a quite different role in another storyline, most notably in their own, where they are protagonists and hence most likely to be developed to their full complexity. It is then the aim to uncover, and in turn to adopt, those alternative perspectives – alternative to the superordinated one of the Ring-quest – in order to complement the picture of the story and especially of the characters. Ultimately, any final interpretation and evaluation of a character needs to take into account the multiple perspectives from which this character can be looked at.

The second part of the paper pursues the goal of highlighting several characters to whom the theory of the multi-quest could be fruitfully applied and sketching the basic lines of thought of such an approach. The first example of a secondary quester to be considered in this way is Samwise Gamgee. Sam is the foremost helper in the text; in fact, he is the co-quester to Frodo: always subservient, always in secondary position. At least this is what early reviewers claimed, calling him Frodo's "dog-like servant" (Wilson, 1965: 329) and a "pure stock character – lovable [and] useful [...], but as a characterization virtually meaningless" (Raffel, 1969: 237). In fact, he is much more

than that. While he shares the same storyline with Frodo, he and his master have different goals. Only when he considers taking up Frodo's quest of destroying the Ring himself after Shelob's attack, Sam voices this thought explicitly: "I can't help it. My place is by Mr. Frodo. They must understand that – Elrond and the Council, and the great Lords and Ladies with all their wisdom. Their plans have gone wrong. I can't be their Ring-bearer. Not without Mr. Frodo" (Tolkien, 1987a: 345). Sam's goal is to take care of and save his master, not to destroy the Ring. He elevates the task of the helper to the status of a quest, and it is one which eventually becomes a more "active" subplot than the Ring-quest; in his (successful) attempt to save Frodo from the tower of Cirith Ungol, his quest arguably becomes far more heroic than Frodo's[10], who retreats into the background, and also more ambitious in terms of character development. What is more, Sam explicitly becomes the central character at the end whose story is literally the one that takes over Frodo's in the "Red Book": "'I have quite finished [the Red Book], Sam', said Frodo. 'The last pages are for you'" (Tolkien, 1987c: 307). In the course of *The Lord of the Rings*, Sam manages to develop out of the secondary role of the helper towards a protagonist who transforms his subservient task into a heroic quest. This perspective could be a promising starting point for an in-depth character study of Samwise Gamgee.

The next example is Gollum. His perspective deviates much more radically from the dominant one of the Ring-quest because it is diametrically opposed to it. While much of Gollum's story, especially as regards the pivotal moments in his development, is covered by Frodo's in books IV and VI, his quest in fact reaches much further back in time. It has the single goal of recovering the Ring and was hence initiated when Bilbo found his "precious". In the primary narrative, only the end of this long quest is directly narrated, while the main part is only fragmentarily developed in the text. What is more, we are informed about Gollum's wanderings only indirectly via several sub-narrators, namely Bilbo, Gandalf, Aragorn, and Legolas, none of whom are sympathetic to him. This adverse introduction predetermines the reader's expectations of this character. Yet it is significant that these negative portrayals are mediated indirectly via other characters and are not given by the narrator. One may contrast their stories with his own account in which he, for example, talks about the

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[10] See Tolkien's statement (1981: 161) that Sam becomes the "chief hero" of the book in *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

maltreatment he received through the elves. This evaluation is seconded by Frodo himself, who often scolds Sam for mistreating Gollum and eventually reconsiders his own verdict against Gollum in his early discussion with Gandalf[11]. It is Frodo who thus advises us to put ourselves in Gollum's position, and from this position the roles of the main characters are reversed: Sam becomes an opponent, the Ring is the desired quest object, and Frodo its guardian. This character triangle and their passage to Mordor are all the more complex when one considers their contradictory goals without necessarily privileging the Ring-quest.

Gollum's story also has a different climax. The climactic point for Gollum is arguably not the catastrophe on Mount Doom because by this time Gollum is already irrevocably lost, if not to the fire but to the Ring. The pivotal scene in his development comes earlier, directly before he leads the hobbits into Shelob's lair. In this most "tragic moment" (Tolkien, 1981: 330) of the whole text, he is exposed to us as an individual who may decide for himself in his interior debate: whether to forsake the Ring or to betray the sleeping hobbits: "For a fleeting moment, could one of the sleepers have seen him, they would have thought that they beheld an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing." (Tolkien, 1987a: 324). The tragic quest of Gollum's life is here foregrounded, and although there is no happy end possible, it is the fatal decision of Gollum in this situation that determines his downfall.

The third of the multiple questers who brings in a wholly new perspective is Éowyn. The relation of her story to the Ring-quest is quite different than Sam's or Gollum's; in fact, they are almost unrelated. The war of the Ring merely provides the inciting moment for her quest for subjectivity. This quest in itself is directed precisely against an established, dominant perspective, namely that of the patriarchal society of Rohan. In other words, the thematic essence of Éowyn consists in the struggle for overturning a superordinate perspective that relegates her into a subservient position:

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[11] "What a pity that Bilbo did not stab that vile creature, when he had a chance!" in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1987: 68); this may be contrasted with Frodo's claim that "I will not touch the creature. For now that I see him, I do pity him." in Tolkien, *The Two Towers* (1987a: 222).

"Shall I always be left behind when the Riders depart, to mind the house while they win renown, and find food and beds when they return? […] All your words are but to say: you are a woman, and your part is in the house. But when the men have died in battle and honour, you have leave to be burned in the house, for the men will need it no more." (Tolkien, 1987c: 57-58)

Of course, this is not a straightforward struggle. The main obstacle to her claim for an autonomous, self-chosen path in life is underscored by the fact that the narrative of her glorious deeds in battle partly hides her achievement behind her male *alter ego* Dernhelm. In the same vein, it is significant that her story is interpreted by various male onlookers, who stand by her sick-bed in the houses of healing (*Ibid:* 142-145). Several feminist readings interpret this as a relapse[12], but actually it is merely the juxtaposition of different perspectives of several characters. The ending of Éowyn's quest in the houses of healing, however, provides a more radical twist than her attempt to overcome the role assigned to her, because while her participation in the battle was indeed very successful, it still accepted and adhered to the mechanics and patriarchal rhetoric of war. It is only after Éowyn, the shield-maiden and Faramir, Gondor's captain leave behind their military ambitions that they are able to overcome that value-system which ultimately determined both their identities heteronomously. In the context of such a pacifistic worldview as that which is primarily exemplified in the hobbits, this ultimate turn towards love and healing can only be a personal triumph.

The final example of a secondary character who may be interpreted as a quester is Galadriel. She is chosen for analysis in particular because she is a very unlikely quester: in *The Lord of the Rings*, she mostly appears as a static donor, but in fact her own perspective is bound to be radically different. Galadriel's story is transtextual: it is developed in different parts of the *legendarium*[13]. *The Lord of the Rings* only hints at her quest, which began far back in the Elder Days with her joining the rebellion of the High-Elves against the Valar and their exodus towards Middle-earth in

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[12] For example, cf. Candice Fredrick and Same McBride (2001), *Women Among the Inklings: Gender, C.S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Charles Williams* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press).

[13] Most notably, cf. "The History of Galadriel and Celeborn and of Amroth King of Lórien", in J. R. R. Tolkien, *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth* (1998: 294-348).

order to found realms of their own. Galadriel also succumbed to this desire for independent sovereignty over dependent subjects, although it was veiled behind nobler motives for enlightening and enriching the forgotten Middle-earth; nevertheless, the ban of the Valar not to return to Valinor established a permanent constraint. In *The Silmarillion*, some stages of Galadriel's exile are narrated (Tolkien, 1999: 61 *et passim*), resulting in her position as we find her in *The Lord of the Rings*: a local ruler of a beautiful, but very narrowly limited and secluded domain that has little impact on the politics of Middle-earth.

In this position the Ring-quest joins her own, and while Galadriel is seen from Frodo's perspective as a donor, or a helper, Frodo almost becomes a donor to her when he proposes to give her the Ring and thereby places the greatest temptation before her:

"'I do not deny that my heart has greatly desired to ask what you offer. For many long years I had pondered what I might do, should the Great Ring come into my hands, and behold! it was brought within my grasp. […] You will give me the Ring freely! In place of the Dark Lord you will set up a Queen.'" (Tolkien, 1987b: 381)

Up to this point, it was not so clear what an eminent turning point, a moment of utter conflict Frodo's coming to Lothlórien means for Galadriel. The resolution of this scene confirms that we witness a real test of character (and not just a hypothetical temptation): "Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad. 'I pass the test,' she said. 'I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.'" (*Ibidem*). The sorrowful poems that she subsequently recites when the company leaves Lothlórien reflect upon her failed ambitions and her renouncement of power as well as the barred passage into the West (*Ibid:* 388-389). The character development from the ambitious Elven-queen towards this example of humility and wisdom is here extremely compressed, but it draws on a slow progression over thousands of years in which all the questions involved in this temptation have been pondered. Yet her final choice, which is key to the pardon she eventually receives by being allowed to return to Valinor, is not limited to herself but affects other characters as well. In particular, it is Gimli who receives

the decisive momentum is his development from his encounter with Galadriel (*Ibid:* 394-395).

These examples are merely starting points for extensive character studies, which may similarly be undertaken for other characters, such as Pippin and Merry, Aragorn, Gandalf, Boromir, etc. Any such reading will build on the fact that the function performed by secondary characters in the Ring-quest is complemented by their own quest experience. As one may expect, the protagonists are typically the most carefully characterised personalities. Consequently, secondary figures become much more interesting objects of studies on literary character when they are considered as protagonists of their own quests. What is more, taking a fresh look at substantial parts of the narrative from a marginalized perspective also enriches the appreciation of the development of the main protagonist because Frodo's role is seen from different vantage points. Finally, the multi-quest interpretation also allows for a more nuanced evaluation of the main storyline of the Ring-quest as it is confronted with other narratives. It may be related to them via (partial) convergence, passing overlap, (mutual) indifference, estranging deviation, or even open antagonism. These different perspectives and evaluative stances contribute to the overall interpretation not just of the characters but also of the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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